DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 061 201 TE 002 843

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TITLE Science-Fiction as Humanistic Study.
PUB DATE 71
NOTE 7p.
JOURNAL CIT English Record; v22 n2 p49-55 Winter 1971

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Curriculum Planning; *Humanities; Interdisciplinary Approach; *Literary Genres; *Literature; Novels; *Science Fiction

ABSTRACT

The future curricula of the humanities are discussed in relation to the inclusion of science-fiction as an appropriate subject. It is believed that the curricula of the future will have the following characteristics in common: (1) Although curricula will give due recognition to the contributions of the past, it will begin in the present and will focus on the present and future world. Emphasis on understanding the present will be essential for survival; (2) It will be interdisciplinary and will cut across or eliminate the narrow subject matter compartments into which education is now arbitrarily divided. Three science fiction books that embody these criteria are discussed. (DB)

English Record
Vol. 22, No. 2,
Winter 1971.

ED 061201

SCIENCE-FICTION AS HUMANISTIC STUDY

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Until the present time, science-fiction has been almost completely excluded from the public school curriculum. Science teachers have frowned on it because of its lack of authenticity and verisimilitude and English teachers have not recognized it as literature because of its style in which often, as Isaac Asimov states, "The plot is the character."

But society and its institutions, of which education is a major one, is changing. As is common in all periods of revolutionary change, the need and desire to change are coming from below; from the people. These changes are all movements toward a loosening of existing institutions, movements toward freedom, brotherhood, and understanding. Educational changes are reflected in high dropout rates, in the rejection of traditional occupations by recent graduates, in the establishment of free and alternative schools, and in cries for relevant curricula.

One national grass roots movement which reflects the desire for relevance goes under the amorphous title of "the humanities." In New York State alone there are 1,000 separate secondary school humanities courses, organized in each school district by individual teachers or groups of teachers who have this urge for freedom, this need to move across subject lines for the kind of interdisciplinary awareness and knowledge needed by the Renaissance man of the twentieth century.

This new curriculum pattern brings with it new problems. One of these asks whether the humanities can be fitted into a slot in the existing educational structure or whether it will come to be understood through the metaphor of the orchestras in the concentration camps which supposedly, as they piped the victims to the gas chambers, made this ultimate journey more humane. Some of the theorists of this emerging area believe that it is possible to have a period set aside during the school day for the humanities and believe that from this model total change will eventually come.

Regardless of whether it begins as one small part of the curriculum or as a total educational philosophy, this new area of the humanities requires different content from that traditionally taught in the schools. The curricula of the future will have the following characteristics in common:

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TE 002 843

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a) Although curricula will give due recognition to the contributions of the past, it will begin in the present and will focus on the present and future world. Emphasis on understanding the present will be essential for survival, for, as Alvin Toffler says in *Future Shock*, the result of contemporary image bombardment" is the accelerated decay of old images, a faster intellectual through-put, and a new, profound sense of impermanence of knowledge, itself."[1]

b) It will be interdisciplinary and will cut across or eliminate the narrow subject matter compartments into which education is now arbitrarily divided.

The genre of science-fiction embodies both of the above criteria. Readers find it prophetic, meaningful, possible, relevant, and highly interesting. Arthur C. Clarke, in a taped interview about his film SPACE ODYSSEY: 2001, says that *young* people seemed to have no difficulty in understanding what is was about. He further states that science-fiction is the only literature he knows which is concerned with "reality." Most fiction, he points out, is concerned only with little bits of reality which happen to one small species on one small planet. To Clarke, science-fiction embraces the entire world.[2]

Let us look at a few science-fiction works to see how they embody these criteria. First, the novel, *This Perfect Day*, by Ira Levin.[3] This book combines politics, philosophy, theology, sociology, psychology, and language, for a stimulating perspective and prophetic warning about the present and future. The setting is the world of the future, in which worldwide unification has occurred. There is no war, no sickness, no fighting, no poverty, no bad odors, no rebellion, no class struggle, no neurosis which cannot immediately be overcome.

Certain things have been sacrificed for these achievements. The major one is individuality. People are known primarily by their numbers which are placed on bracelets at birth and may not be taken off until death.[4] Every family has a resident psychiatrist, who, believing he is benevolent, keeps individuals tranquillized through weekly injections of drugs.

The center and God of this universe is UniComp, the infallible computer, who sees all, knows all, decides all, loves all. The theological aspects of this book are an extension both of our contemporary attitudes toward God and the computer. They reflect the classic computer joke: a scientist feeds a question to the computer, "Is there a God?" The computer replies, "There is, NOW."

Pilgrims are occasionally granted the right to visit UniComp which is housed in a white marble dome, in a beautiful setting, of

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1 Alvin Toffler, **Future Shock** New York: Random House, 1971, p. 139.

2 **2001 . . . And Even Beyond.** Paul Anderson and Arthur C. Clarke, noted science fiction writers, discuss "2001 . . . A Space Odyssey," the new film which Mr. Clarke and Stanley Kubrich devised. Recorded in May of 1968. Pacifica Tape Library, 2217 Shattuck Avenue, Berkeley, California, 94704.

3 Paperback, Fawcett, 1971.

4 This book has many similarities to the film, THX, 1138, one of the best science-fiction films yet produced. In both, there is loss of individuality, a de-emphasis on sex, de-emphasis or complete repression of man's creative functions, a robot God, and a boring sameness to life and work which almost completely dehumanizes man.

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stately snow-tipped mountains and the Lake of Universal Brotherhood. A ritual of colored lights, music, a soothing announcer's voice, and smoothly working machinery, combine to move the pilgrims to tears of pride and happiness.

Psychology has changed in this world of the future from individual analysis to complete chemotherapy. All people are drugged from birth to death, to keep them pliable and docile. Drugs prevent emotional extremes. Families break-up with little emotion, sex has become a muted, ten-minute a week experience, and all major decisions about work, marriage, and reproduction are handled by UniComp.

The philosophical conflicts in this novel are as old as civilization. What would it be like to have a utopia? Is a utopia possible? What must be lost to achieve utopia? Will utopia be good for mankind? Is it worth giving up personal and creative freedom for social welfare?

The hero of the book escapes to a corner of the world not controlled by UniComp. This so-called free world, an island called "Liberty" has different problems, that are equally bad. The original inhabitants of the island practice racism against newcomers; there is social class and caste; government, church, and army unite to form a dictatorship. On Liberty there are slums, dirt, destructive and backbreaking work. Ignorance of the uses of technology, hunger, low pay, identity cards, and a hostile populace. Both of these recognizable worlds are extrapolations of the present.

In this book, as in George Orwell's *1984*, language is used by the establishment as a tool for political and social power. Only one language is permitted, language is simplified and ritualized, and foreign language books gather dust in museums as relics of the pre-unification time (reverse Tower of Babel). Universal communication has been achieved but this seeming gain has been diminished by a loss of nuance and imagination.

Curse words become those things frowned on by UniComp. "Fuck" is used openly and without emotion because sex has become so unimportant to these tranquillized people. The new curse words are "hate", "brother-fighting", "fight Uni", "you fighting well better had." Greetings are "Love of Family", and "Thank Un..." The words of the national anthem are:

> One mighty Family,
> A single perfect breed,
> Free of all selfishness,
> Aggressiveness and greed;
>
> Each member giv-ing all he has to give
> And get-ting all he needs to live!
> One mighty Family,
> A single noble race,
> Sending its sons and daughters
> Bravely into space . . . . (page 97)

The arts, in addition to creative language, in fact, all forms of creativity are prohibited in this world for they both foster and are the expression of individuality. It is evident that this book deals with relevant questions for the present and future and is interdisciplinary in its content and allusions.

A second recent science-fiction work, *Tower of Glass,*[5] by Robert Silverberg, also is interdisciplinary in mythic allusion and scientific content. The mythical base is the biblical story of the Tower of Babel.

The protagonist of Silverberg's book, Simeon Krug, has, by the year 2218, developed godlike powers, in his perfection of the production of androids. His synthetic people look just like people but are superior to them because they possess the skills of machines in addition to human versatility.

Krug has now set himself the task of reaching God, or the source of all matter and intelligence, through antennas set on a tower of glass, the tallest structure ever attempted by man. While Krug is attempting to reach *his* God, he is unaware that, as the creator of the androids, he has become a god to them. Part of the reason for Krug's eventual downfall is the discovery by the Androids of what might be called, "Deism;" that is, the recognition of God as merely an expert watchmaker who has no emotional ties with his creations once they were produced.

Another recent book which demonstrates this same interdisciplinary depth is *The Simultaneous Man,* by Ralph Blum.[6] The conflicts in this book, as in the other two discussed above, are real issues about which all citizens may some day be forced to think. In Blum's world, science has achieved the ability to delete through chemotherapy, the negative impulses in people and to replace them with behavior patterns which are more constructive to the individual and to society.[7]

The initial experiment is carried out on a "prisoner-volunteer", a black, twenty-four years of age, wounded twice in Korea, awarded the Silver Star in Vietnam, and given a life sentence before an Army court-martial on the charge of murdering an officer during a Ranger mission. "Operation Remake" is accomplished through the use of hypnosis, electrode implantation, chemicals and computerized medicine. As in *Tower of Glass,* man is taking on to himself godlike powers.

The simultaneous Man is given the skills, intelligence, and life story of one of the scientists. The successful process results in two men, one black and one white, with identical memories and abilities. The possession of a body by another spirit has always been

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5 Robert Silverberg, **Tower of Glass,** Bantam Paperback, 1971.

6 Bantam Paperback, 1971.

7 Note recent suggestions about reducing warlike tendencies of our leaders through chemotherapy, made by Kenneth Clark, President, American Psychological Association.

viewed as evil. In the days of the Inquisition it was believed that "by means of Satanic possession men changed themselves into wolves (lycanthropy) and prowled about at night devouring children."[7]. In the famous Yiddish play, *The Dybbuk*, a young Jewish girl is possessed by a dybbuk, the soul of her dead bridegroom, who refuses to leave her body, despite threats of anathema and excommunication. Paddy Chayefsky wrote a contemporary version of the dybbuk story in *The Tenth Man*, and in Robert Heinlein's novel, *The Puppet Masters*, the dybbuks are aliens from another planet who plan to take over humanity by putting their souls into human bodies. Here, in *The Simultaneous Man*, there is a reversal of this attitude toward a basic myth.

In the three books discussed above, we have seen that science-fiction can be regarded as a curricular focus for the humanities because it is truly interdisciplinary in nature. The initial criteria also stated that valid humanities curriculum content links past and present myths. One of these archetypal myths concerns man's willingness to sell his soul to the devil in exchange for certain temporal rewards. Homer W. Smith, in *Man and His Gods*, describes the origins of this myth in the Middle Ages.

> For is was held that in exchange for a man's immortal soul the devil might endow him with wealth, fame, love, honors, knowledge or magic power, and many were the medieval stories of such pacts drawn up on parchment and signed in blood. Typically these pacts ran for a stated course of years before the devil was entitled to collect his price, and there is this much to be said for him: never once is it recorded that he became impatient and came to collect his due one day ahead of the specified date, or that he failed to fulfill his end of the bargain by holding back a little gold or cunning or sensory delight from one to whom he had promised them, much less that he ever attempted to slip out of the bargain entirely . . .[8]

The Faust legend is derived from this myth. In the original tale of Faust, the pact is made with Mephistopheles in exchange for superhuman knowledge. Mary Shelley used this myth symbolically in *Frankenstein*. Her scientist's pact with the powers of darkness is only symbolic. By tampering with knowledge that is beyond the province of man Frankenstein unleashes the powers of darkness and loses his soul.

A contemporary version of the myth can be found in a fine science-fiction novel, *Seconds*.[9] In this work, the lure is eternal youth, re-birth, a new life.

A mysterious organization gives middle-aged people a chance for re-birth. The latest techniques in medicine and surgery are used for this purpose. Like Faust, before the day of reckoning, the hero seems to have attained everything he's ever wanted:

> All those longings you had back in the olds days—well, they've come true now. You've got what almost every middle-aged man in America would like to have. Freedom. Real freedom. You can do any damned thing you want to. You've got financial security and you've got no

7 Homer W. Smith, **Man and His Gods.** Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955, p. 275.
8 Homer Smith, **op. cit.,** p. 268.
9 David Ely, **Seconds.** Signet Paperback, 1963.

> responsibilities, and you've got no reason at all to feel guilty about what you've done. The company's taken care of everything . . . of course, you're anxious. But that'll pass. You're a pioneer, old boy. That's literally true. The old frontier, you know what that was? That was a dream, too. A new life, a new chance. Out on the prairies, in the mountains, wherever there were empty spaces for men to start over again . . . there's a different frontier now—the frontier of personal freedom, and I mean *real* freedom—and there are different pioneers, too. You're one of 'em . . . . (p. 82)

In Goethe's version of *Faust,* his sincere repentance finally brings him forgiveness and after his death angels bear his body heavenward. The fate of David's Ely's Faust figure is startlingly similar to the death of the traditional Faust whose friends find his room all smeared with blood; "his brains are spattered over the walls, and his eyes, torn from their sockets, and a few teeth are lying on the floor. The corpse, trampled and mangled, is found outside the house, tossed onto a muck heap."[10]

Another myth which has been repeated across the ages is the myth of the Garden of Eden, which, in literature, has become the search for utopia. C. S. Lewis in *The Perelandra Papers* has described a space-age Garden of Eden, as has B. F. Skinner in *Walden II.* An excellent depth discussion of the presence of this myth in science-fiction can be found in an article by Mary S. Weinkauf, "Edenic Motifs in Utopian Fiction."[11]

The science-fiction element has always been present, albeit in different form, in these tales of Paradise. In the *Gilgamesh Epic,* the epic about the traditional hero of Babylonia, in the marvelously fertile land of Paradise grew a Tree of Everlasting Life. And in the Old Testament Garden of Eden, Adam was made of clay in a less simple but nonetheless manufactured process as are the androids in the Silverberg book, and no science-fiction device has surpassed the apple of the tree of knowledge. Even the techniques described in the Blum book take much more than one bite to educate. In a contemporary version, the serpent would be an alien.

Another recurring myth is the myth of the rebellious angel. In Greek mythology it was Prometheus, who brought fire to man and for this boon was doomed to eternal torment by Zeus. The story of Jesus changed the bringer of the boon to mankind to the emissary, not the adversary of God and his torments were caused by other human beings, jealous of his divinity.

Robert Heinlein in *Stranger in a Strange Land* has put this myth into science-fiction terms. His Christ figure is a human being, Valentine Michael Smith, born and brought up on Mars, who is brought back to Earth where he founds a new religion. Among the religious rites is the baptismal symbol in which people become water brothers and learn to "grok" each other. Smith, like Jesus, has extraordinary

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10 Homer Smith, **op. cit.,** p. 269.

11 Mary S. Weinkauf, "Edenic Motifs in Utopian Fiction", **Extrapolation,** The Newsletter of the M. K. A. Seminar on Science Fiction, Thomas D. Clareson, editor, Box 2515, College of Wooster, Wooster, Ohio 44691, December, 1969, volume 11, number 1, pp. 15-22.

gifts. He is able to go into a trance, discorporate himself and other people, and to read with electronic speed.

Smith is referred to as a new Prometheus, who wants to bring a better world to man. Although his superior powers are sufficient to keep him from harm, he permits his crucifixion (by stoning) secure in the knowledge that his disciples will carry on his work.

The list of myths which reappear in science-fiction is endless; Lazarus sleeps for hundreds of years through a freezing process that keeps him in suspended animation; the immaculate conception takes place in a test tube; Noah's ark is a space ship which takes off just as earth is being destroyed, and the new lepers are people who have been exposed to radiation as in Daniel Keyes' novel, *The Touch.*

Science-fiction does not lend itself to specialization; all of man's accumulated knowledge is its subject and worlds as yet unknown are its arena. Science-fiction is a more than appropriate subject for the humanities for all of humanity is its subject.

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